

# US criticises Uganda over journalists rights

BY JOHN MASABA

The US government has criticised the Uganda government officials for harassing journalists.

This is contained in a US State Department statement released in Washington on Thursday to mark the international day to end impunity for crimes against journalists.

"Journalists are often under threat from those who wish to silence them... In Uganda, government officials have intensified their crackdown against freedom of expression, including intimidation of journalists," read the statement.

On Tuesday, Police questioned Vision Group editor for weekend editions and investigations, Felix Osike, over a story about the Police chief, Gen. Kale Kayihura. The story quoted residents of Muyenga, a Kampala suburb, where the IGP lives, complaining that they were harassed and subjected to thorough checks by Kayihura's guards.

Kayihura has denied the claims.

Osike was on Tuesday charged with offensive communication, two days after *Saturday Vision* carried a story titled, 'Kayihura's security beefed up', on October 28. Police summons, which had required him to appear within minutes of delivery, had indicated that the charge was 'disturbing the peace' of the Police chief.

Osike, who was earlier grilled for hours over the story, insisted all checks were done to verify the authenticity of the report. He was released on bond and ordered to return to CID headquarters in Kibuli on November 7.

Recently, a car belonging to another Vision Group journalist, Simon Masaba, was broken into by unknown people, who took off with a bag containing his notebooks.

In addition to Osike, a number of other journalists, including those from the Monitor Publications and other online media platforms, have been quizzed over related charges.

The development has drawn condemnation from several media

practitioners and human rights activists, with some suggesting that the actions are an attempt to scare journalists off critical subjects that the public has the right to know.

Responding to the state of affairs, the US warned that the developments threaten not only good journalism, but also has ramifications for freedom of expression of Ugandans.

"Together with others in the international community, we will continue working to eliminate impunity for crimes against media professionals. On International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, the United States renews its dedication to promoting a free, professional and independent press abroad and to advocate for accountability for those who would undermine a free press with threats, intimidation and violence," the statement added.

The International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2013 in a bid to recognise the important role journalists play in nation building and also to end impunity against their mistreatment.

The World Press Freedom Index, ranks Uganda in the 112th place out of 180 countries, a marked decline since Uganda was in 102nd position last year and 97th in 2015.

Reporters without Borders, which releases the rankings, attributed Uganda's decline to increased intimidation and violence meted on journalists while in the line of duty.

Around the world, the statement added, journalists work often at great personal risk to report on issues that impact the lives of individuals in all societies. They shine a light on abuses and corruption; expose threats posed by transnational criminal organisations and counter disinformation and propaganda that spread false narratives.

Uganda is listed alongside Nigeria, South Sudan, Russia, Turkey and Sudan as countries where "crimes against journalists go unpunished".